

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE DESIGNS OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS DURING THE EARLY POST-WAR PERIOD IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

Exemplifying with two Taiwanese national museums built in the 1950s and 1960s, this paper demonstrates how nationalism played a central role in shaping the development of Modern architecture in post-war Taiwan. After WWII, the Nationalist Party (KMT) retroceded Taiwan from Japan but simultaneously retreat there. This led to their strong attempt to reconstruct a cultural, historical, and ethnic relationships between Taiwan and China. The KMT strived to erase any traces of Japanese colonial constructions and to redirect the island's social identity toward the Chinese Nationalist's traditions. Such rise of Chinese nationalism stimulated several architects to search for a national style. They traced the root of the style from the past and connected it to their modern designs with an attempt to create a sense of community and national identity visually.

With Taipei's Nanhai Academy and the National Palace Museum as case studies, this paper argues that 'museum' has come to be conceptualized, not merely as place of exhibition, but as political symbols which represent the official definition of the nation. 'Museum' was given a political function and loaded with powerful political icons: axial and ceremonial arrangement of spaces, iconographic programmes and spatial narratives, evolutionary chronological displaying, pseudo-Chinese classical architectural elements, and the sculptures/ portraits of political elites placed in squares and exhibition halls. This paper contends that the two exemplifying museums which carry political function actually visualize the imagination of the nation. By interpreting these museum architectures in a broader social and political context, and verifying with museology, the paper demonstrates that an investigation of the Chinese national style would be inevitable if a better understanding of the development of modern architecture in Post-war Taiwan is to be achieved.

Keywords: Nationalism, National Museum, Taipei's National Palace Museum, Chiang Kai-shek

In 2000, Benedict Anderson, the author of an influential book *Imagined Communities* which marked a turning point in nationalism studies, visited Taiwan and had a short discussion about the contemporary development of Taiwan's nationalism. Anderson argued that the National Palace Museum was the political legacy of the KMT's rule over Taiwan. In the post-war period, Chiang Kai-Shek took most of the Qing royal collections from Beijing's Forbidden City and

preserved them in Taipei's National Palace Museum. Chiang treated these collections as 'national treasures' to demonstrate that he was the real heir of orthodox Chinese culture and the nation. However, after a successful process of democratisation had taken place in the post-martial law era of Taiwan, the KMT attempted to get rid of Chiang's legacy and its close connection with Chinese nationalism. To achieve this, Anderson suggested that returning all royal collections back to mainland China should be considered.

Anderson's suggestion has shown that museums, especially national museums, are not a neutral phenomenon. The material in museums is more than just collections. Museums imply a general process of political inheritance at work. It is a profoundly political concept of a nation that shapes museums and makes them possible. Anderson called it a form of political museumising (Anderson, 1991). Taipei's Nanhai Academy and the National Palace Museum are the best examples to demonstrate this close relationship between nationalism and museums.

It is generally agreed that recent studies in new museology, or critical museum theory, have introduced a broader sense of social and historical perspectives to museum studies, improving the way we view and understand them. These theories provide sharp analytical tools to challenge the old orthodoxy of museum studies and to shake up the way in which we view museums. While the tenets of new museology are argued by a disparate group of researchers, common threads can be found in their work (Vergo, 1989).

The first is a call to understand that 'objects' displayed in museums have been isolated from their original context. Objects are inserted into museums, new environments providing total protection against the decay of natural forces. Objects cease to perform their original function in daily usage and start to circulate in the world as private properties. Time is completely frozen in museums in order to preserve the objects on a long term basis or even in perpetuity for the purpose of collection, examination and exhibition. This change in use and ownership makes the objects become the collections of museums, conceived to be meaningful as the most important treasures of our society.

The second is recontextualisation. When objects have been put into museums, their life is different from their pre-collection existence. They enter a new stage and obtain a new status as authorised collection in museums. In addition, objects are labelled by their distinctive forms and levels of scarcity. In other words, the value of objects is not derived from their original context, but rather is given by curators and museum professionals who have the authority to judge the objects and place them in exhibition rooms. In other words, museums recontextualise objects and imply a set of power relationships which controls the way they are re-interpreted and exhibited.

The third concern is that only some particular objects are selected to be protected and displayed in museums. As Susan A. Crane has argued (2000,2-3), the purpose of museums is to fix the past of our cultures and societies through objects by selecting what deserves to be kept, remembered and saved out of time. As a result, museums create a vision of the past and future based on contemporary needs. They also formulate an organisational principle to collect, arrange and preserve the objects for reconstructing the past.

The fourth issue of the New Museology is ideology. For these new museum researchers, museums are not neutral spaces telling the 'real' stories of nature or human creations. As they have pointed out, objects in museums are not 'pure', 'authentic', or 'untouched since they had been found or had been made'. It is the effect of ideology which plays an important role in museums in framing the way in which we view the collections and experience the museum spaces. According to new museology, there are three types of ideology: evolutionary chronology, iconographic programme and nationalism.

(1) Evolutionary chronology: Enlightenment thinkers in the early modern era started building and organising exhibitions and collections in an enlightenment mode. It helped to create a new rational order of things. It also helped to naturalise and neutralise the way in which we view objects in museums. As a consequence, objects are classified in chronological order. Each of them represents a particular period of progressive development in form and style to

exemplify evolutionary changes in history. This makes the experience of walking through museums like passing through time.

(2) Iconographic programme: Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach suggest that museums should be seen as a kind of cultural shrine (Duncan and Wallach, 2006). The key function of these shrines is to impress visitors and make them believe that what they see in exhibitions are the most revered treasures of societies. The installations of exhibitions, layout of rooms and sequence of collections all create experiences that resemble traditional religious experiences. Like other ceremonial monuments, museums are complex architectural forms which organise visitors' spatial experiences as a script organises a performance. By following the script, visitors engage in a visual activity full of ritual meanings (Duncan and Wallach, 2006, p.53). Nothing will illustrate the contemporary iconographic programme better than the notion of object lessons in modern public museums. When works of art no longer serve as royal collections but are claimed as national treasures, they are used to show the wealth of nations to impress 'new visitors', usually citizens of the nation. These citizens are given a lesson in museums about the history of their nation and their own roots (Duncan and Wallach, 2006, p.58-9).

(3) Nationalism: like many other architectural types, museums provide a cultural underpinning for the development of the modern nation-state. After nationalism became mainstream ideology in the early modern age, museum objects were calculated as part of the wealth of the nation, and 'rediscovered' their unique national characteristics. New objects were chosen to be protected and displayed in museums, because they had distinctive features which could represent the nation. Objects were given a new identity, different from their previous existence, as cultural and political symbols of the nation. The nation-states even monopolise interpretation of the objects. As a result, objects in museums are nationalised and codified as part of the visible evidence of the historical narrative of the nation (Bennett, 1995).

Objects in the museums do not directly and automatically transmit meaning to visitors. The meaning of objects depends on the context of other objects, the

spatial design, the method of representation and the environment of museums. Museum architecture is of central importance to the visitor experience. One of the long-standing ways to envision museums is that museum architecture is a sacred space protecting national treasures from the outside world (Marstine, 2006). The architectural form of museums is expected to visualise the image of the cultural shrine that can give visitors a sense of privilege and an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the mysterious past.

However, many innovative ideas of establishing a modern national museum for the public were derived from the Louvre in Paris. The Louvre can be viewed as the prototype of national museums, which restored multiple art works and anthological and archaeological objects viewed as national treasures (Duncan and Wallach, 2006). The success of the Louvre attracted new nations to take it as a model for imitation. After the Qing emperor was forced to move out of the Forbidden City in 1924, several politicians and cultural elites took the Louvre as example to support the establishment of the National Palace Museum in the Forbidden City (Hamlish, 1995).

Soon after it was opened in 1925, the Second Sino-Japanese War took place. The Museum was forced to close due to the spread of the War in Northern China, with the national treasures retreating with the Nationalist government from North to Southwest of China. When the Chinese Communist party took control of China, the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan and carried most the important treasures with them. It took another forty years of waiting to witness Taipei's National Palace Museum opening in 1965. Before the Museum was rebuilt, all packaged collections were temporarily housed in Beigoukou, Taichung (Na, 2004). These objects were unpacked only for academic research on special request of related scholars. This small exhibition room attracted numerous sinologists, Chinese art historians and a great number of ordinary people.

Before Taipei's National Palace Museum was re-opened in 1965, the KMT used the previous Japanese colonial government's exhibition spaces to display mainstream Chinese art. The Nanhai Academy was among the first group of cultural and educational facilities constructed for the public by the KMT with a

definite political purpose in post-war Taiwan. The idea of the Academy was the foundation of a Chinese museum acropolis in Taipei to preserve Chinese cultural relics and rare book collections that retreated with the government from mainland China. The acropolis also served the function of promoting the orthodox culture of China. In 1953, after Chiang Kai-shek visited the Garden, he asked Chang Chi-yun, the minister of education, to build a series of public buildings which included the Central Library (1955), the National Taiwan Arts Education Centre (1956), the Confucius-Mencius Society of the Republic of China (1956), the National Taiwan Science Education Centre (1958), The National Museum of History (1956-64) and many other governmental institutes to promote cultural and educational affairs. These museums were given a political function to reconnect the link between Chinese nationalism and the Taiwanese inhabitants. They became a visible vehicle for conveying a message that the cultural and political legitimacy of the nation had been firmly tied to the regime.

Although Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT lost the Chinese Civil War, they achieved partial victory in the cultural struggle. Taipei's National Palace Museum was a prime example to illustrate that it was Chiang's regime, not Mao Ze-dong's, that protected the core of Chinese national culture for China. In 1960 Chiang decided to build a grand museum to display Qing imperial collections after their long journey from the mainland that took seventeen years (1933-49). There are three points which should be highlighted in the explanation of the making of the museum:

(1) Sun Yat-senism and the legitimacy of the nation: as mentioned earlier, Sun Yat-senism was a sort of political ideology developed in the late 1920s. This ideology was promoted by Sun's followers who viewed him as a founding father of the Republic and the true heir of orthodox Confucianism. Chiang Kai-shek was one of the leading advocates of Sun Yat-senism. It was no surprise that in 1965, Chiang chose Sun's centennial birthday as the day for the re-opening of Taipei's National Palace Museum. It conveyed a clear message that the Museum was built to honour Sun who left a rich cultural and political legacy to the nation. On the day of the re-opening, Chiang visited the Museum and made a famous speech to re-affirm that Sun was the true successor who had inherited the long-

established Confucian tradition from previous cultural sages and national heroes. Chiang also denominated the Museum as the Chungshan Museum in remembrance of Sun (Chiang, 1977, p.89). For Chiang, rebuilding the Museum in Taipei was one of the ideal ways to realise Sun's cultural and political thought.

(2) Anti-Communist ideology and the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement: the establishment of the National Palace Museum symbolised the regime's determination to guard the valuable treasures of the nation. During the Cold War period, Communist China closed itself off from the world. Researchers who were interested in Chinese culture and history had to come to Taiwan for their primary sources. Taipei's National Palace Museum was the only place that preserved the largest number of Chinese art and imperial documents outside mainland China. As a result, the Museum became one of the must-see attractions for foreign scholars and tourists who visited Taiwan for academic or diplomatic purposes. The Nationalist government to promote an image that it was Taiwan and not the mainland that was the true stronghold of Chinese culture.

In 1966, the Chinese Communist Party launched the Cultural Revolution under the leadership of Mao. Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT viewed the Revolution as a threat to Chinese traditional culture. Chiang immediately launched the Chinese Culture Renaissance Movement to fight against the Revolution. The goal of the Movement was to revive Chinese traditional culture through the leadership of Chiang's cultural policies. The Movement attempted to strengthen the role of the National Palace Museum, instituting a political ideological mission, glorifying nationalist spirit and patriotic sentiments (Du, 2003).

(3) Nationalism and the object lesson: Like other museums around the world, Taipei's National Palace Museum also had a function in education. The Museum's rich collections of Chinese culture could help the Taiwanese to understand the history of their motherland. By this process it was argued that the Taiwanese would come to recognise that they were inseparable members of the Chinese nation (Du, 2003). Thus, Taipei's National Palace Museum played an important role in providing these object lessons to the Taiwanese, achieving the governmental aim of decolonisation and re-signification in the post-war era.

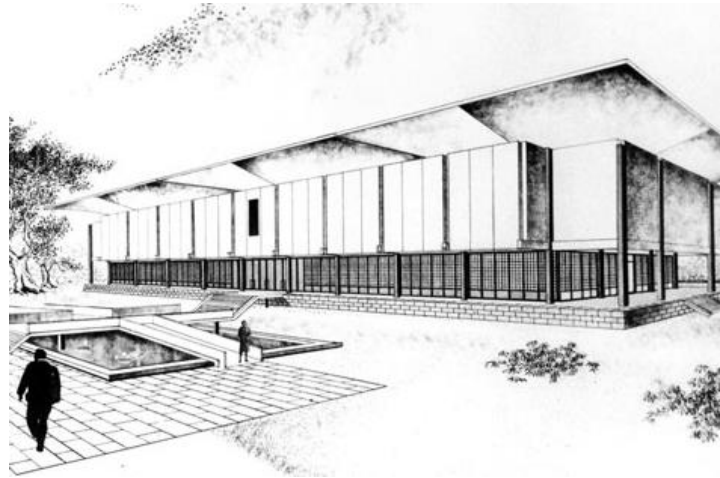


Figure 1. Wang Da-hong's design of the National Palace Museum.

When Chiang Kai-shek decided to build a grand museum to house the royal collects in Taipei, a closed architectural design competition for the Museum was held by the museum committee in 1961. Wang is a famous architect who gained a great reputation for his creative designs in transforming Chinese traditional architectural form into a modernist language. A graduate of Cambridge and Harvard University, Wang was heavily influenced by a modernist architectural education. He also disapproved of Taiwanese architects who directly copied the model of Western modernist architecture in their work (Li, 1979). He was looking for an alternative direction of architectural expression based on pure modernist architectural principles without losing a traditional Chinese character. The design of the Museum was one of Wang's early attempts.

In this design, the main body of the Museum is a modernist rectangular box topped with three reverse umbrella-shaped roofs. The curve indicates the outline of Chinese traditional building roofs, but was made in a pure modernist form and with new concrete technology. This design showed that Wang attempted to combine the creative structure system and simple modernist form with Chinese classical architectural motifs to express a new image of modern Chinese architecture.

Although Wang won the competition, his design did not actually carry out. The main reason was that Chiang Kai-shek was very dissatisfied with the result. He thought that the design did not fulfil his vision of the Museum which planned to display the most important national treasures of China. Therefore, the museum committee finally decided to transfer the project to another architect: Huang Bao-yu (1918-2000). Huang presented a grand museum cladded with palace-like roofs and Chinese classical building decorations. His design directly conformed to the museum committee's imagination of an impressive museum for housing the most important national treasures of the nation.



Figure 2. Huang Bao-yu's Design of the National Palace Museum.

As Tamara Hamlish has argued, what the state preserves in the museum is not the collections themselves but their symbolic significance as a sign of political authority and legitimacy (Hamlish, 2000, p.158). The design of Taipei's National Palace Museum shows the intention for museums to be some of the most significant cultural and political representations expressing the might of nationhood, by creating an image of a splendid national cultural shrine. In Huang Bao-yu's design, there are three important points that should be considered.

(1) The axis, monumentality and impregnability: Taipei's National Palace Museum is located in a scenic area of Waishuangxi, a suburb of Taipei near to the Yangming Mountain and Shilin. Many foreign embassies are located in that area. The Mountain and the nearby Tianmu are also the popular residential districts for foreigners. In addition, many other Chinese political and cultural elites lived near Waishuangxi. Chiang Kai-shek also had a residence close to Shilin. When the Museum was reopened, Chiang visited the Museum more often than before (Suo, 1986). The advantage of the location marked the site as the best place for the Museum to promote the Nationalist government's political and cultural ideology to foreign and domestic tourists (Ju, 2007).



Figure 3. The Museum's storage space inside the mountain.

Huang Boa-yu's design placed a long axis to welcome visitors from the gateway arch through the Museum main building to the mountain behind the Museum. Like most Chinese imperial palaces, the axis started from the gateway arch highlighting the monumentality of the Museum. The axis was an elaborate design of the iconography programme used to impress visitors with a sense of imperial China. The gateway arch also symbolised the beginning of the journey taking visitors through a time tunnel from the present day to the ancient past. Here, they prepared themselves to leave the secular world behind, to face the

sacred shrine in front of them. Following the axis, architects placed a long and vast square, magnificent outdoor staircase. The grand museum main hall and its storage tunnel lay hidden in the mountain as a sequence of spatial experiences.

The end of the axis was a mountain, an ideal place to preserve national treasures. The architects dug a huge tunnel inside the mountain as storage space for the collections. The tunnel was well-built for its purpose, meeting the highest standards of safety, preserving the treasures from theft, looting, or destruction by natural disasters and war. Hidden in the mountain, this tunnel created an image of impregnability to express the determination that the government would do whatever it took to protect the treasure from the outside world.

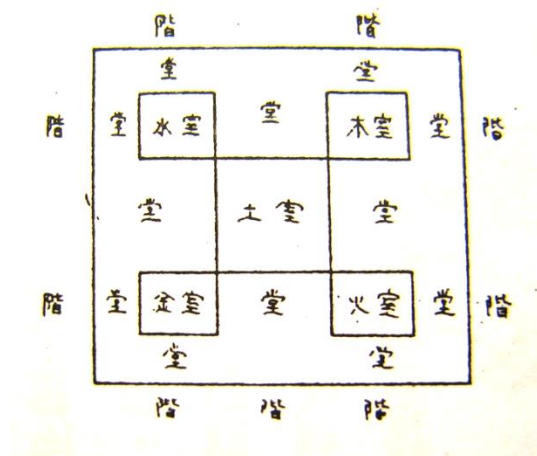


Figure 4. The Illustration of the Shihshih

The climax of the axis was the Museum's top floor, a mingtang space, also known as the prototype of Chinese imperial building in the ancient era. This space dominated the axis visually from the beginning to the main entrance of the Museum, indicating that the Museum had a strong spatial link to its imperial past.

(2) The traditional mingtang space: in Huang's design, the arrangement of the exhibition halls was composed of four square rooms surrounding a tall central lobby in the middle. This sort of design referred to the traditional mingtang

space. The space was the place that represented the ideal model of the highest level of political space in ancient China. The space was also viewed as the origin of China's imperial buildings. Originally, it was an open, empty square hall, built on a raised ground floor surrounded by four other rooms in four directions without intervention by walls or windows. Like the Greek Agora or Roman Forum, the space was used for people to share their ideas of politics and public affairs in ancient Chinese society (Lu, 1988).

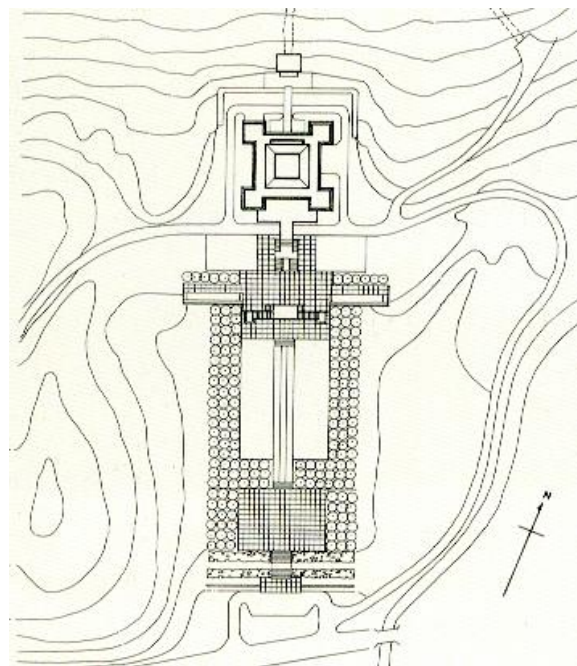


Figure 5. The Site Plan of the National Palace Museum.

Huang's design attempted to reconstruct a mingtang space in the Museum. In the layout, a tall central lobby was surrounded by four square exhibition rooms in four directions. This layout clearly referred to the original idea of the mingtang space. On the top floor above the lobby to welcome every visitor, Huang also rebuilt a mingtang shaped hall surrounded by a winding corridor. This hall was called the Sanxi Hall, named after Emperor Qianlong's favorite study room in Beijing's Forbidden City. The Hall was the apogee of the axis that led every tourist to the Museum from the outside. Inside, no matter which routes or

exhibition rooms that tourists chose to visit first, they would all finally be guided to the same hall, the Sanxi Hall on the top floor. Therefore, the Sanxi Hall was the centre of the iconographic programme which dominated visitors' visual and spatial experiences from the outside and the inside. The shape of the Hall indicated that the Museum's architectural style had a strong link with the Chinese imperial building tradition.

In the exhibition spaces of the Museum, all the collections were grouped by their types; bronze ornaments, paintings, calligraphy and porcelains, all displayed in separate rooms. The objects of each group were arranged in chronological order from the ancient era to the Qing dynasty. This order implied an evolutionary view of history displaying the national past in a modern form of classification. The old Emperors' collections now were treated as an 'art' preserved by cutting edge technology in a modern museum. Ju Jane C. calls this new way of exhibition and conservation the formation of 'canons of Chinese art' (Ju, 2004, p.489). In other words, the process of recontextualisation now gives the collections a new life. They no longer are the property of the royal family, but state-owned art work exhibited in the national museum for the public.

(3) Political symbols: apart from the axis, architectural style, layouts and ways of exhibiting, there are many other political symbols attached to the Museum. First of all, Sun Yat-san's favorite maxim and original calligraphy 'All under Heaven belongs to the People' was inscribed on the gateway arch. Sun quotes this phrase in his book *The Three Principles of the People*, asserting that this phrase fully represents the ideal model of Confucian political thought that should be introduced to modern society in order to reconstruct China's contemporary political order (Wang, 1981). In addition, the full text of the *Words of the Great Unity* was inscribed on the wall next to the side entrance, and these inscriptions were to keep reminding visitors of Sun's political legacy and its relationship to the Museum.

Statues and portraits of Chinese political figures are also displayed in the Museum. The most famous statue among them is Sun Yat-sen's statue standing in the middle of the central lobby. Chiang Kai-shek's portraits also hung in the

central lobby next to the statue and near the front gate (Du, 2002). These statues and portraits made certain that the Museum reflected an element of political atmosphere.

In fact, the political influences upon the Museum were more than what could be seen from the outside. As mentioned earlier, Chiang Kai-shek held the authority to overturn the final result of the Museum's architectural competition, and he also expressed his opinions to architect Huang Boa-yu's about the design of the Museum several times. According to Huang, Chiang was very satisfied with the design, which coincided with his vision of modern Chinese architecture. After that, Chiang invited him to design more buildings for the government and the party. Chiang visited the Museum frequently after it was opened to the public. He gave opinions to the curator on improving the service, including the condition of exhibition rooms, English guides, the reception of foreign guests and uniforms (Chiang, 1988). In addition, Chiang appointed his people to work for the Museum (Lin, 2000). From this it is clear that the construction of the Museum was very important to Chiang.

To conclude, Taipei's National Palace Museum is one of the greatest museums preserving the most important treasures of Chinese art, rare books and royal documents. In the early years, China's national museums were simply considered to be one of many representations of the national past. Not until Beijing's National Palace Museum opened to the public, did the Museum begin to take on a more essential symbolic role in defining national identity. After a long retreat to Taiwan during the wars, Chiang Kai-shek and the government recognised that the Museum and its collections were a very useful tool for political propaganda. Reconstructing a grand museum with a splendid Chinese classical architectural style in Taipei was one of the most important political missions in the post-war period to demonstrate that only Free China had the ability to rebuild and revive Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, Taipei's National Palace Museum is not a neutral space preserving national treasures as objective truths of the past, but a cultural shrine creating a vision of the past based on certain political needs.

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